

Testimony Before Assembly Budget Committee
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Good morning, Assemblyman Greenwald and Honorable Members of the Assembly Budget Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of the New Jersey Council of County Vocational-Technical Schools as you begin your budget deliberations for fiscal year 2009.

Although we have faced tough fiscal times before, the 2010 budget is surely the bleakest and most difficult that I have seen in 24 years in and around New Jersey state government. The extraordinary economic meltdown that has unfolded over the past 8 months has touched every sector of our economy and every citizen in our state. State revenues are declining at a time when people's needs are escalating.

Governor Corzine's proposed budget represents a series of very difficult choices. New Jersey's county vocational-technical schools are grateful and relieved that the Governor was able to recommend a modest increase in education spending this year. Thanks to the infusion of over \$1 billion in federal economic recovery funds, some districts will see an increase of 5%. Most will be level funded.

Among our 21 county vocational-technical school districts, eight counties will receive an increase of 2-5%, 7 counties will be level-funded, and **six counties will receive a cut in state aid**. How could this happen when the Governor promised that no district would receive less than last year?

The proposed budget eliminates the \$10 million line item for Adult Education. County vocational schools will lose a total of \$2.9 million. This funding supports adult high school programs that provide dropouts and other adults a second chance to earn a real high school diploma. These programs are the only viable route for underprepared young adults to return to the education system, finish high school, and move on to the workforce.

After several years of uncertain funding and program cuts, Speaker Roberts, Assemblywoman Quigley and the members of this committee restored funding for adult high school aid in FY 2008. The programs are provided by 8 county vocational schools and 26 local school districts. Sadly, both the number of programs and the students served has declined sharply as state support for adult high schools has become uncertain.

In 2002, 54 programs in 18 counties served 13,660 out-of-school youngsters and adults seeking a high school diploma. Six years later, enrollment is down 39% as 20 programs have closed their doors.

Yet the need for second-chance diploma programs is ever-increasing. The 2000 Census shows 7 New Jersey counties (Atlantic, Cumberland, Essex, Hudson, Passaic, Salem and Union) in which more than 20% of adults over age 25 lack a high school diploma.

Though accurate dropout rates remain elusive, I believe we will see shocking numbers when New Jersey begins to calculate graduation and dropout rates according to the methodology endorsed by the National Governor's Association. Substantially increased high school graduation requirements, based on college preparatory expectations for all students, will push more underachieving students out of school and further exacerbate the dropout rate.

Most of these dropouts will be unprepared to test for a GED diploma. They need the structure and support of an education program designed to motivate out-of-school youngsters to stay the course. Without adult high school programs, there will be no second chance for them to earn the most basic credential for success - a high school diploma.

County vocational-technical schools, and other districts that provide these programs want to continue to meet this need. Yet, the elimination of adult high school aid will leave many school districts with less state support than they got last year. Their other costs are rising and freeholders and local boards of education are limited in their ability to increase taxes. If the state sends a message that adult high school does not matter, most communities will reduce or eliminate their programs. What other choice can they make?

Funding for adult high school programs was included in the prior school funding formulas (CEIFA, QEA, Chapter 212), but was eliminated in FY 2004. At that time, \$18.5 million for adult high school programs was shifted into a new category known as Consolidated Aid, and school districts were told they could use the adult high school money for any purpose. With their school funding stagnant and the programs no longer generating aid, many school districts cut their adult high schools, which are not mandated by law.

The Legislature stepped in to rescue adult high schools in FY 2008, and we had hoped that this need would be addressed in a more permanent way as part the new school funding formula (SFRA) adopted in 2008, as recommended by the Joint Legislative Committee on School Funding Reform. Though funded last year and included in district's state aid notices and payments, the program is not part of the formula and thus has been cut again.

Senate Bill 2115, sponsored by Senators Cunningham and Kyrillos would provide a permanent and predictable source of funding for adult high school programs by including them in the state aid formula. In the short term, we ask the Senate Budget Committee to consider restoring funding for adult high schools to the FY 2010 Budget.

Perhaps with the support of the Legislature and the Administration, we could identify a short-term funding source through the federal economy recovery act. A high school diploma is the first step toward meaningful employment. Connecting proven education programs with a job training component would prepare today's dropouts to become tomorrow's workers.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today on behalf of our county vocational-technical schools, and the larger community concerned with the needs of underprepared dropouts in New Jersey. We recognize the difficult times facing our state and the enormity of your task. We ask you to restore state support for adult high schools not only because we believe that these individuals deserve a second chance, but because we know that our communities and our state cannot afford the long-term cost of leaving them behind.